

DOW Environmental Educator Receives State Garden Club Award

Howard said her interest in the outdoors began at a very early age.

“My dad was a backyard naturalist who taught me to identify critter trails, trees and birds,” said Howard. “As a family, we gardened and camped and spent time in our natural surroundings. It bothers me that many kids spend their youth camped in front of a TV or video game.”

After earning her B.A. in English at Eastern Kentucky University and her M.A. in environmental education from Murray State University, Howard began to search for a way to combine her interests in education and nature outside of the classroom. She found it in AmeriCorps Vista and, subsequently, in the Peace Corps.

“I spent nearly three years in Gabon, central Africa – primarily teaching schoolchildren, in French, about ecology,” she said. “It was a lesson in ingenuity, since there was no environmental education program in place when I arrived in the regional capital of Mouila. I decided to build on the efforts of local farmers and a departing agriculture volunteer and use school gardens as a tool to demonstrate ideas like interdependence and biodiversity.”

Howard said that serving in a Third World country taught her a lot about the First World from which she had come.

“It wasn’t always easy offering lessons of environmental stewardship from the voice of a nation which has devastated most of our old growth forests,” she said. “In Gabon and other countries, they still have pristine environments. They have a chance to learn from our mistakes.”

Howard said that her stay in Africa was bitter mixed with sweet.

“There were times I wondered what I’d gotten myself into,” she admitted, “but I learned some powerful lessons – and I have ‘family’ there now. And, of course, the natural beauty...I walked on beaches with sea turtles, stared a silver-back gorilla in the eye, watched troops of mandrills swinging through the trees – it was incredible!”

Howard said her experiences in Africa led her to realize that she wanted to pursue a career in environmental education. Her position with the Kentucky State Park system allowed her to use her enthusiasm, ingenuity and love of the outdoors to foster appreciation of nature among park guests and the local community.

Howard went well beyond leading nature and wildflower hikes as she initiated programs to reach out into the community and engage local residents in environmental activities. She brought in speakers on local history and culture, was a regular presenter at schools, recruited volunteers and the local garden club to install rain gardens and native plant gardens on park property – all of which led to her selection for the GCKY award.

Howard said while she is honored by the Garden Club award, she's most proud of the community involvement and continuation of the nature-based programs and projects she worked to establish.

"Environmental education can engage everyone," Howard said. "By recognizing local resources – natural and social -- and building on the connections between them, any community can build awareness and promote stewardship. And the more of the community that's involved, the more likely the project will be sustainable."

The Garden Club of Kentucky is a member of the South Atlantic Region of the National Garden Clubs, the largest volunteer gardening organization in the world. It is dedicated to promoting interest in horticulture, beautification and wildlife preservation.